

Science Group visit to FAST Museum 2015

Sevenoaks U3A members attended the Science Group visit to the Farnborough Air Sciences Trust (FAST). The museum has been established on the old Royal Aircraft Establishment site at Farnborough as a permanent record of our aeronautical heritage. Its founders could see that the new MoD management initiative to transform the business on site to a Government Trading Agency, and latterly a fully privatised company, would lead to a loss of much of the historical artefacts and buildings. Early listing prevented destruction of the more important buildings on the site and it was pleasing to see the subsequent redevelopment had sympathetically incorporated the old with the new. These include the original HQ office building built in the early 1900's and used as Lord Trenchard's office in WW1, the large 1924 Wind Tunnel complex, a Water Tunnel (used for testing Seaplanes) the structural part of the original Balloon Factory and one of the more modern offices transformed into the National Aerospace Library which holds the archive of the Royal Aeronautical Society.



The Cody Flight Simulator

The Farnborough site has been at the forefront of aeronautical development since the beginning of the twentieth century. The first manned heavier than air powered flight in the UK was undertaken on site by Samuel Franklin Cody. He was an American showman who managed to obtain Government sponsorship to demonstrate the advantages of powered flight as a means of artillery observation in preference to the established Balloon and manned kites used at the time. Cody built his No 1 biplane and managed a flight of 27 seconds reaching a distance of 1,390 ft (420 m) on 16 October 1908. It unfortunately crashed on this attempt and led the War Office to declare that "the powered Aeroplane had no place modern warfare". Less than a year later on the 25 July 1909, Louis Blériot crossed the English Channel from Calais to Dover proving the War Office view to be flawed and by 1912 the Royal Aircraft Factory had been established. It changed its name on the 1st April 1918 to the Royal Aircraft Establishment to avoid confusion with the newly formed Royal Air Force.

The 100th anniversary of the Cody flight is commemorated by reproduction of the No.1 Flyer that sits in its own hangar and our more adventurous members attempted to fly the machine on the 21st century flight simulator; I am pleased to report they did a much better job than Cody did on his first flight.

The museum is still being developed and on display are some famous aircraft from the Farnborough fleet which include the English Electric Lightning, Hawker Hunter, Anglo–French Jaguar, Folland Gnat, Helicopters and a fuselage cabin section from Concorde.

One of our members, Brian Alleeson, was able to donate some drawings of the Farnborough site in its former days. Brian had worked on site as a civil engineering contractor in the past and had rescued the drawings from destruction. Needless to say the museum was pleased to receive the drawings.

As part of our visit we also received a talk from the Librarian of the National Aerospace Library. The reference material includes rare historic documents from earlier times; for example the 18th Century note books of George Cayley who is recognised as the father of aeronautics. His scientific understanding and experiments underpin much of today's theory of flight. We were also shown early reference material from Short Brothers of Rochester in Kent who in 1909 based their first aircraft on the Wright Brothers flyer. A team of volunteers were busy restoring many of the items in the collection.

A tour of the site included the exterior of the Wind Tunnel complex, unfortunately the building is not yet ready for public access but it will provide an opportunity for a return visit at some point in the future. A thoroughly enjoyable day hosted by a very enthusiastic and knowledgeable team